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Soviet Combat Brigade Stages Cuba Exercise, Pentagon Source Says

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WASHINGTON — The Soviet combat brigade in Cuba has carried out its first full-scale combined arms exercise since the storm over its presence on the Caribbean island produced a mini-crisis for President Carter last year.

This was reported yesterday to Copley News Service by a highly placed Pentagon source, who said U.S. intelligence had confirmed that the 2,000 to 3,000 Russian troops had engaged in infantry-artillery-tank maneuvers in a training area near Lourdes, Cuba, last month.

"The brigade had been assuming a rather low profile until this exercise," the source said.

"Perhaps the Kremlin felt Mr. Carter was so preoccupied with presidential election politics that he wouldn't make a fuss over it."

Neither the White House nor the Pentagon has made any public statement about the brigade's maneuvers, although the event took place at least two weeks ago.

Late last summer, Mr. Carter reluctantly admitted that U.S. intelligence had detected the presence of the Soviet combat brigade in Cuba and said, in a prepared statement, "We consider (it) to be a very a serious matter and this status quo is not acceptable."

However, after diplomatic pressure failed to persuade the Soviets to withdraw the combat troops, Mr. Carter told a nationwide television audience the "Soviet Union does not admit the unit in question is a combat unit" and had informed him the brigade has only a training mission and "can do nothing more" than that.

"These assurances have been given to me from the highest levels of the Soviet government," he said. "Although we have persuasive evidence the unit has been a combat brigade, the Soviet statements about the future non-combat status of the unit are significant."

The combined arms exercise by

the full brigade brings into question the validity of these Kremlin assurances to the President and as to how "significant" they are.

Last summer, the White House denied, in response to inquiries from Sen. Richard Stone, D-Fla., and the press, any knowledge of organized Soviet troop units in Cuba, although leaked U.S. intelligence reports indicated there was considerable evidence that such units were, indeed, stationed there.

Then, late in July, the CIA's National Intelligence Daily, a publication which goes to about 300 top government officials and intelligence experts, said it had confirmed the brigade's presence.

Copley News Service broke this story Aug. 30 and the next night, Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, after being informed by the State Department, made what amounted to an official announcement of the event. Church is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of Central Intelligence, told the Association of Former Intelligence Officers last Oct. 6 that the Soviet brigade consists of three infantry battalions, a tank battalion and artillery, anti-aircraft and anti-tank elements.